

How JFK, LBJ and Nixon All Put Their Stamp on the Apollo 11 Moon Landing

The 1969 mission was so ambitious it took three presidents to see it through.

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A little before 11 pm on July 20, 1969, [President Nixon](#) sat in his small hideaway office in the Executive Office Building next to the White House. He'd put a lot into NASA's mission to land on the moon, not the actual development—all of that was done before he took office—but in making sure that Apollo 11's success would be read by America and the world as the [success of his presidency](#).

Watching Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin take their first steps on the Moon, Nixon's anxiety reached a peak. If anything went wrong, he would have to manage America's outrage over billions of tax dollars culminating in the death of two astronauts. His staff had prepared [a statement to be read](#) in the event the worst happened and organized a priest to commit their souls to the deep, much like a burial at sea.

Watching Apollo 11's live feed from the Moon, the President could only hope he wouldn't have to read it. He hoped, instead, that Apollo 11, the mission set in motion by his former rival [John F. Kennedy](#) and brought to fruition by his predecessor [Lyndon B. Johnson](#), would boost his own Presidential standing.

Roots of Apollo: John F. Kennedy

Just months into his Presidency, John F. Kennedy was already desperately looking for a way to save face against the Soviet Union. On April 12, 1961, the Soviet Union scored another in a [long line of firsts](#) when Yuri Gagarin became the first man to orbit the Earth. Less than two weeks later, America suffered another embarrassment with the failed invasion at the [Bay of Pigs](#). Seeking redemption, Kennedy turned to NASA, and the agency in turn recommended a lunar landing. This was a distant goal that would give engineers plenty of time to figure out how to get there, and at the end of the day would be a non-aggressive yet unparalleled demonstration of the nation's technological superiority.

On May 25, 1961, after weeks of internal discussions, Kennedy asked Congress to support a lunar mission by the end of the decade. At the time NASA had 15 minutes of suborbital spaceflight under its belt, but it accepted the challenge.

Though Kennedy had put America on the path to the Moon, he grew wary as the cost of Apollo rose. In private talks with NASA Administrator Jim Webb, the President confessed his disinterest in space science and concerns that Apollo would destroy his legacy. He went so far as to call for Apollo's cancellation on September 20, 1963, before the 18th General Assembly of the United Nations; he proposed replacing the American program with a joint American-Soviet lunar mission. But Kennedy's assassination just weeks later secured America's path to the Moon; NASA couldn't let the fallen president's dream die.

Coming into its Own: Apollo Under LBJ

Long before he took office following Kennedy's assassination, and indeed even before he became Vice President, Lyndon Baines Johnson was perhaps the politician most tied to America's space program. As Senate majority leader, [LBJ was instrumental](#) in passing the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958 that established NASA. As Vice President he helped define the agency's goals. It was his recommendation (after conferring with NASA management) that pushed Kennedy to pick a Moon landing as America's big goal in space.

When he moved into the Oval Office, LBJ remained as committed to seeing Apollo lift off by the end of the decade. He ensured the agency had the funding it needed (a whopping 4.4 percent of the national budget at its peak in 1966) and took steps to pass the U.N. Outer Space Treaty that banned placing any nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction in space; the Moon, he ensured, couldn't be claimed for one nation. When the

crew of Apollo 1 was killed during a routine pre-launch test on January 27, 1967, he let NASA conduct its own accident investigation in the name of keeping the program on schedule.

But the rising cost of the ongoing war in Vietnam [took a toll on Johnson's commitment](#) to space towards the end of the decade. Funding Apollo was one thing, but LBJ was unwilling to approve significant funding for any additional hardware or Saturn V rockets that would play into post-Apollo programs. By the time he left office, NASA's budget was already dwindling but the agency was firmly on the cusp of accomplishing Kennedy's lunar landing goal.

Putting His Stamp on the Landing: Richard M. Nixon

Richard Nixon thus inherited a space program poised for greatness and without long-term plans, but for the moment the new President remained focused on the positive. In June of 1969, now with 19 manned missions and countless hours in simulators to its name, NASA was deep into final preparations to make its first lunar landing attempt with Apollo 11 and Nixon's team began devising ways to parlay the mission into evidence of the President's leadership.

Though neither he nor his administration had contributed much to Apollo's success, Nixon was determined to use the lunar landing missions to bolster his own approval rating and reputation. To that end, he sought to inject himself into the mission. He wanted to have a pre-launch Presidential reception separate from any NASA events. He wanted to watch the launch from somewhere interesting like a ship.

When NASA discussed the idea of a phone call with Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin while they were walking on the Moon, he jumped at the idea of a split-screen TV appearance with a live feed from the Moon. He wanted to have dinner with the crew before launch—ideally the night before they left—and was [adamant](#) about getting on the recovery carrier at the end of the mission.

Though he hadn't campaigned for it, Nixon even got his name on the plaque fixed to the Lunar Module's leg; NASA decided to include the sitting President's signature along with

the crew's in an attempt to secure a positive feeling on the agency's post-Apollo programs. Nixon even personally approved the inclusion of the text "We Came in Peace for All Mankind" on the plaque.

Apollo's Success

By the time Apollo 11's lunar module Eagle touched down at the Sea of Tranquility, Nixon had so entrenched himself in the flight that his tension was palpable. Nine years earlier, NASA had just 15 minute of suborbital space under its belt. Now it had two men standing on the surface of another body in space for the first time in history. In the intervening years, NASA's learning to live and work in space had opened space up to a whole new era of discovery and exploration.

Sitting in his small, private office next to the Oval Office with Borman and Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman at 10:56 in the evening local time on July 20, Nixon watched as the ghostlike figure of Neil Armstrong descended down the ladder and took his first small step on the Moon's surface. Less than 20 minutes later, Nixon was in the Oval Office reading prepared remarks directly to Armstrong as he walked on the Moon, much to the surprise of Aldrin who didn't know the presidential call was incoming.

Apollo 11's moonwalk was the visible expression of 400,000 people working for nine years towards a singular goal. Apollo had survived three administrations, one major accident that killed three astronauts, and the tumultuous 1960s to realize the dream of a President who wasn't alive to see it. The final price tag of the program once it concluded in 1973 was a staggering [\\$28 billion](#) (about \$288 billion today). Even as the world watched Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walking around on the Moon, only [53 percent of Americans believed the missions had been worth the cost](#).

Four days later on July 24, Nixon was on board the USS Hornet to welcome the crew back to Earth. Standing outside their mobile quarantine facility, he joked that his call to the Moon had been collect, told them he'd spoken to their wives who were all outstanding and brave women, and put them on the spot with a dinner invitation two weeks hence.

Throughout this presidential welcome, Armstrong was eager to get it over with so the crew could relax and celebrate with the people who had actually made the mission possible.

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